

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 25, 2016 (Proper 18, Year C)

Once upon a time, when I was a fraternity pledge, one of the brothers came up to a group of us and demanded to know the lyrics to the song *Louie, Louie*. We had one hour to present them. Or else...well I don't know what, but something bad. Now, if you know the song, which has been played by every garage band that ever played in a fraternity basement, you know that the lyrics are unintelligible. I mean, nobody has any idea what they say beyond "Louie, Louie" and "we gotta go" and "yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."

This was before the magic of the internet, of course, so 10 of us crammed into a dorm room, played the cassette over and over again, and argued about the lyrics. Little did we know that it really didn't matter; that we'd been sent on a fool's errand. Not only did no living person, including the lead singer, have any clue what the lyrics really were but by the time we presented our interpretation to the brother in question, he'd forgotten he'd even asked us in the first place. Such was life as a pledge in the Delt house at Tufts University.

I thought about this for the first time in years as I read through and reflected on the lessons appointed for this morning. The gospel passage from Luke in particular, this peculiar parable about the rich man who is condemned to eternal damnation and the poor man who is carried away by angels into heaven. Their earthly lives were as diametrically opposed as their everlasting fates. At the end of the reading the rich man pleads to have the poor man, whose name was Lazarus, return to earth and warn the rich man's brothers to turn their lives around so they don't also end up, like him, in the place of torment. To which the reply comes, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." In other words, they have been warned over and over again about changing their ways and behaving differently towards the less fortunate. And they simply will not listen; they refuse to heed the call to a life of compassion. You could send Jesus Christ himself and they would rebuff him too, in favor of self-justification and comfort.

For some reason, I couldn't get the Simon and Garfunkel song "Sound of Silence" out of my head as I sat with this passage. In particular, the line about that sign that said, "The words of the prophets are written on subway walls and tenement halls. And whispered in the sounds of silence." The "words of the prophets." Like the rich man in this story, like the Israelites time and time again, we so often ignore the words of the prophets.

Often we ignore them because they're not the messages we want to hear. They may be challenging or off-putting. They may be messages from the margins of society; messages that advocate for the poor, the disenfranchised, the powerless; messages that tell us that black lives do indeed matter. The prophetic voice is not a mainstream voice. It often shines a light into areas that, all things being equal, we'd rather not see. Out of sight, out of mind, under the rug. It's the voice of the prophet Amos, a powerful voice for social justice that we've heard the past two Sundays. There's a note of warning in this morning's reading to the rich and powerful that

continues the prophet's harsh words about those who "trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor."

Why didn't this rich man heed the warnings of Moses and the prophets? Probably because it would have forced him to look in the mirror and make some lifestyle changes. And when you're living high on the hog, why would you possibly want to change anything? Why would you want to make sacrifices to help others at the risk of losing some of your own authority or wealth or comfort? Well, you probably wouldn't. And so you ignore messages to scale back or readjust or give back or repent. And you do so, according to Jesus, at the loss of your very soul.

The point of this parable isn't to condemn the wealthy — as Father Noah reminded us last week "God doesn't hate the rich." But it is to highlight the evil in our self-centered lack of concern for our fellow brothers and sisters. Apathy or indifference to those in need is sinful. Ignoring those who stand begging outside our proverbial gates distances us from God. And this story reminds us that what we see and how we respond in this world impacts our standing in the world to come.

The rich man wasn't damned because he was wealthy or because he wore fancy clothes or lived in a mansion. He wasn't damned because he lived in luxury and dined sumptuously. He was damned because he wouldn't even look at the poor man who lived in abject poverty outside his very gates. He wouldn't even look at the pile of dirty, smelly rags he considered inhuman; an ugly "thing" rather than a fellow child of God, a human being made in the image of God.

Those who originally heard this parable would have been shocked. They assumed that blessings in this life were signs of God's favor while poverty and illness were signs of God's displeasure. Beggars didn't get to heaven, while rich men were assured priority seating at the heavenly banquet.

Do we believe in the hidden world of righteousness, peace, and spiritual joy? Or do we put our hope in the fleeting pleasures of worldly wealth? This is the choice that is set before us. Just as much as the choice proffered last week between serving God and wealth.

Like the words of *Louie, Louie*, the sound of silence can be interpreted in multiple ways. It's easy enough to use silence as a false sense of security. Burying your head in the sand certainly brings about silence. Despite the warnings, despite the words of the prophets, it's easy enough to ignore them. Hear no evil, see no evil.

Yet there's another approach to silence, a spiritual embrace of silence that isn't about ignorance but listening. Prayer is the Christian disciple's sound of silence. It's a silence that troubles the water; a silence that allows us to hear the cries of the distressed and downtrodden and voiceless; a silence that opens the heart in gratitude and thanksgiving and compassion. A silence that can't help but lead to action in the name of Jesus Christ.

I encourage you to enter into this sound of silence that is prayer and reflect upon the messages you may be ignoring. They may indeed be written on subway walls or tenement halls. But mostly, they're written on your heart. And it takes prayerful silence to hear and interpret them. May God be with you, and all of us, in that sound of silence.